

Introduction

During the 2000-2001 school year, the seventh grade Language Arts students of Greenbelt Middle School embarked upon an extraordinary “*Learning Expedition*.” Their mission was to become better readers, writers, speakers, and listeners, but to do that while learning about relevant subjects that they would choose themselves. They would become knowledgeable about these subjects by reading books, interviewing experts, watching videos, classroom discussion, debate, and classroom lectures.

The subjects that they chose were, Homelessness, Child Abuse, Teen Pregnancy, Divorce, and Gang Violence. While researching these issues they expressed their thoughts and feelings by writing short stories, poems, essays, character sketches, oral histories, plays, letters, reviews, critiques, and responding in writing to various questions. These “*Thoughts . . . In the Key of Life*,” are presented in this book.

In the process of pursuing their mission to become better readers, writers, speakers, and listeners, our students have developed not only their abilities but also their passion for reading and writing, speaking and listening. In addition to these things however, they have also developed their capacity to think both critically and creatively.

We are proud of our students. They hold great promise for our nation and the world. Please enjoy their “*Thoughts . . . In the Key of Life*.”

Charles Thomas

Poems

Why by *George Randolph*

Why must they be homeless
Sleeping on floors.

They should all have a house
With their names on the door.

Why must they eat rotten, dirty bread
Some of them wish
That they were dead

I wish there was
A way to help

But some refuse
To want wealth

I'll never understand
No way, no how

I just think in my mind
Why, and.... wow.

Stories

Short Story by *Sheldun Fields*

In the beginning of June when school let out for the summer, my mother came to pick me up from school. I was glad to see her because of a long day of school. She looked at me with a grin.

“I’m glad the summer is here, aren’t you?” she said.

“Yes, I’m so glad that it’s finally here.” I smiled.

“Well, I wouldn’t be too happy,” she laughed.

“Why mom?” I was curious.

She raised her hand and smacked the crap out of me. Then she drove off. I started to cry.

“As soon as you get home, I want you to do these chores.” She handed me two sheets of paper full of things to do.

“Why do I have to do this?” I said.

She smacked me again.

“Don’t say another word boy!”

We pulled up to our driveway and she literally kicked me out of the car. When I got into the house, I did all my chores. When I told her I was done she said I should wait in the kitchen.

“So, you’re done right?” she said.

“Yes.” I said softly.

“Turn around and close your eyes.”

She raised her hand, which was holding a metal frying pan. She slammed it into my head. I fell to the floor, screaming. I

opened my eyes to look around and immediately saw my own blood. In the red puddle I saw my hair and a piece of my skin floating.

“Welcome to hell, boy.”

A few hours later, about 3:30 in the morning, she came into the kitchen while I was either sleeping or unconscious, (I can't remember which) and hit me with her elbow like she was “the Rock” or something.

“Huh,” I said drowsily.

“Stand up!” she yelled.

“My body... I'm too weak to get up.”

“Fine. Then you can just lay on your back and look at me.”

I slowly did as I was told. Finally as I was able to focus on her I realized that I was face to face with a gun. I stopped breathing for a couple of seconds. I started to think about how I could die on the same day that I got out of fourth grade. Finally I started to breathe again, but I began to sweat rapidly. She cocked the gun and I closed my eyes. Right before she pulled the trigger I felt someone tap me on my left shoulder. I opened my eyes and suddenly I felt no pain at all.

“Good morning! Ready for the last day of fourth grade?” Mom smiled happily.

“What about the gun and the chores, mom?”

“What gun and what chores?”

“Never mind.”

“Okay baby, get up, so you can have a good day at school.”

Character Sketches

My mother, who is very slim and conservative, divorced my father of 3 years last year in June. My father wasn't acting like a real man so my mother up and left, because she doesn't play that. One of her favorite mottos is "never, ever depend on anyone, especially a man."

My mother is also a perfectionist. Everything she does has to be either perfect or almost perfect. I love her because of that, because she always tries her best at everything. She is also into astrology. If I tell her I've got a new boyfriend she always wants to know his sign, or if I meet a new friend she wants to know their sign. That stuff really matters to her. One more thing that I should say is my mother is the most beautiful person you could ever know.

She is five feet, seven inches tall, with very light skin. She's petite and weighs about one hundred and thirty five pounds. She's very attractive. Her hair has gone through a billion different lengths and styles, but right now it is short with blond streaks. She knows how to dress well too. Her eyes are brown and she has an over-bite. I think she's beautiful enough to be a model. One thing I didn't mention about her is that she can never make up her mind, or she will change her mind at the last minute. She works for Morgan Stanley, a brokerage house in New York City.

When she divorced my dad I was a little sad, but who cares, as long as my mommy is happy. I kind of like my mommy better than my dad because she keeps most of her promises. I can't say that for my father. I hate it when he says he's going to pick me up and then he never calls me back. When he does that I don't call him because I'm like my mother, and she says "when someone says they are going to call you back, don't call them until they call you." So, that is exactly what I do. Sometimes we go several days without talking because I'm determined.

Tanasia Mason

When my mother first moved away from the house, I was just three years old. I remember very little from this time but I do remember what the house looked like. It was industrial green, with white trim all around the doors and windows. I remember that there was a flower garden in front of the house. There were two other people there besides my mom and brother but I can't remember who they were. I also remember the furniture being moved out, but that's about all I remember from the day I moved out of my home.

I don't know how this affected my brother because he kept to himself and was very quiet. I do know that it bothered him some because when we left he cried. Sometimes he cries about it now. It didn't really bother me at the time it happened because I didn't understand what was going on. However, later in my life it affected me a great deal. I used to break down at times about not being able to see both my parents at once. Now, I've gotten over that almost completely and it doesn't bother me as much anymore.

The first move sent me just a little northeast of New York City to my Uncle Roy's house, where I stayed for several months. Later, I moved to Virginia, where I stayed at my mom's friend Alana's house. I stayed there a few months until the settlement. The settlement ordered us to move within a thirty minute drive of my father's house, so we moved to Stephen's Walk apartments. When that lease was up, I moved to Horizon Square apartments where I stayed for three years or so. After that, I moved to Crofton where I stayed for a year. We then moved to Nashville and stayed there for about a year. The next move was to a house on Mason St., near Andrews Air Force Base. Finally, I moved back to the house I originally lived in on Greenbelt Road in College Park.

When the court settlement came and I had to move back to Maryland, I had to switch parents every Tuesday, Thursday, and every other weekend. Later, I think my mother got total custody, but I'm not sure. Finally, the courts said that I would go to my

mother's in the summer and on long holidays, and would stay with my father for the school year.

In the beginning, the divorce affected my father very little in the way of income. Later, he had to start paying \$800.00 dollars a month to my mother. That is when he really started to show signs of being stressed out. As for my mother, she now had to support her children alone with little monetary support. Overall, I think she was affected the least.

I guess this is what it's like to be the kid of divorced parents.

Gaelan Hopkins

Comparison of Life and Choices
by Latoya Dates

A baby... a friend
A loved one... a family

A party... a night in
Some freedom... some traps

Lots of pain... lots of fun
Good consequences... bad consequences

Right way... wrong way
Left over... still here

Mad... glad
Regrets... Satisfaction

Fifteen
by Ruttarna Hansen

I was fifteen
Still a child
I didn't know what to do
I was going wild

I smoked, drank
Going out of my mind
I was so stupid
I went out of line

I was scared
I didn't know what to do
I did it with my boyfriend
Cause he said "I love you"

When I found out
I was having a baby
I told my boyfriend
And he went crazy

I thought he loved me
But I guess it was a lie
Cause one day he walked out
Without saying goodbye

Oral History

Kimberly Phillips as told to Ashley Warden

I first saw my true love at the age of thirteen. At the time I did not know what love was all about. I did not know that this boy, who's name was Ronald Warden Jr. would make my heart skip a beat. I was never a shy person, but I could never let him know how I felt about him. In middle school, everyone liked everyone, so you pretty much kept everything to yourself, that is, if you did not want to be the talk of the school. Well, one day he walked up to me and asked me if I had a boyfriend. That is where everything started.

I thought that all of my dreams had come true. I came from a very loving family. I knew that he did not, and that his grandmother was raising him. Well, our relationship was wonderful. For two years, we spent all the time we could together, going to the mall, to the movies, and hanging out at each other's house. Our families approved of our relationship, and we all got along very well. We were always happy together. I started finding out that he was the jealous type after those first two years. At that time I thought that was the greatest thing, he cared so much that he wanted to know my every move, and he always wanted to be with me. Not long into our relationship we demonstrated our feelings with kissing and cuddling. We thought about sex but we were scared so we didn't do it at that time.

When I turned fifteen, my mother came to me and wanted to talk about sex and protection. I was a little uncomfortable talking with my mother about it, because I thought that she would think

less of me for wanting to have sex at the age of fifteen. I told her that I would come to her when I was ready to do that with Ronnie. I then started feeling stronger for Ronnie and wanted to take our relationship to the next level. Of course, he felt the same way. We did protect ourselves that time, however it was the first time having sex for both of us. It was scary. Afterwards we really did not know how to feel. However, I did know that I loved this guy with all of my heart.

About three weeks went by and I was not feeling very good. I never once thought that I could be pregnant. I never said anything to anyone. I was very scared, and just tried to go through every day acting like there was nothing wrong. At first I thought I might be getting the flu or something. I talked with Ronnie about it and he wanted me to go to a doctor, but how could I go to my doctor's office without my mother knowing about it? So, I just told him that I went and that everything was okay. I think he really wanted me to be pregnant. After three months went by I knew, but I still did not tell my mother. I had Ronnie take me to a clinic, not really knowing what to do or what I needed to do to protect my unborn child. While at the clinic they confirmed that yes, I was pregnant. I cried so hard, but Ronnie was so happy. I really did not know why he was so happy. I cried for days, because I was afraid to tell my mother. Ronnie said he would tell her and I said "NO!" Nothing changed between Ronnie and I. We were really close, and he could not wait for the baby to arrive. He was talking about quitting school and getting a job. Meanwhile, I did not know what to do.

I remember the first time I felt my baby move. That is when it hit me that I had a miracle inside me. I started becoming happy, very happy. I loved the fact that I was going to have a baby that would love me as much as I would love her. I went six months before I told my mother. I thought she was going to go through the roof, and she did. She cried, yelled, and held me, not knowing what to do. She took a few days to think before coming to me to talk about things. I knew I was never getting an abortion, and I

thought that was what she wanted me to do. That is really why I waited so long to tell her. I guess the reality of it all kicked in with her too. She was afraid for me, but she stayed by my side. She still let me know that we would be 100% responsible for our child, that she was not going to raise it.

When I was in my ninth month Ronnie got in trouble with the law and went to jail. I was crushed, because now I was alone, and that really bothered me. My mother was very upset about Ronnie getting locked up, but she didn't say much about it. She still stayed by my side through everything. You have to remember, I never had a father. He left my mother when I was two weeks old, so it meant a lot for my mother to be there for me. At the same time, I was angry with Ronnie for not being there.

Well, the day finally came and I went into labor. I never thought it would be so painful, but it was. I cried loud and hard. I remember saying to my mother that I did not want to be pregnant and I did not want to have a baby, and to please do something to help me. She said that she tried nine months ago and I wouldn't listen, now it was too late and we had to get through this no matter what. Of course, she was right, so I really couldn't say anything. Now I was in the hospital with all of these machines hooked up to me, crying and worried sick. I didn't know what to expect nor did I know what was going on. I didn't know why they were doing all these things to me and I was so upset that I wouldn't listen to the things my mother told me to do. Three hours went by and now the doctor wanted me to push. I didn't know what to do, so I tried. You talking about pain! I have never felt so much pain in my life. I was mad at Ronnie for a long time for not being there with me. Finally at 8:20pm on the fifth of August, my beautiful daughter was born.

That was the happiest time in my life, however, the work had just begun for being a mother. I was a very mature girl at the age of 15, but to be honest, you can never be ready to be a mother

His Soul
by Gaelan Hopkins

Oh, one stormy night
On a street with no light
His soul, it fluttered away
Hey, is he dead? All the people said

His soul, it fluttered away

Like a broken street light
They shot him once
They shot him twice
On that stormy night

Why did he go away
They hear his mother say

The Crips, The Bloods, it matters none

They took his soul, his life
That fateful day, That fateful night

The people had gathered all around
To see him laying on the ground

But his soul, it was taken away.

Epilogue

by Shatoya James

“Thoughts... In the Key of Life” is a book that you can only imagine that an adult would write because its full of well thought out opinions, great dialogue, excellent grammar, and well, adult-like judgement. Well, you would be wrong. This book was written by none other than the adults of the future... kids, children, your little babies. Well, we’re not babies anymore. This book was written by the seventh graders in Mr. Thomas’ language arts classes from Greenbelt Middle School.

When Mr. Thomas told us that we were going to make a book I was excited. I was astonished. I thought it would be just a book for us to read but then he told us it would be published and put out in the world like all the other books we read. I was getting ready to scream or something! I was thinking that I’m going to be famous, and everyone will be talking about it. I was thinking, “I’m going to be rich,” but then I started thinking, “its just a book and I’m not the only one writing in it.” But I did understand that the book will be done and it will be published for the world to know that some kids can do some of the same things that adults can do.

We had to pick five topics out of twelve that we would study and write about in the book and they were homelessness, teen pregnancy, divorce, gang violence, and child abuse. Our first chapter was homelessness, then child abuse, divorce, then teen pregnancy, and last but not least, the most troublesome problem in this world, gang violence.

In order for us to write about homelessness and give Mr. Thomas our opinions about the subject we had to have background information, the information we already knew, and new information. That would give us a good overall picture of homelessness. How I feel about the subject is how everyone else

feels, well, how most people feel. Its bad, its very unhealthy, and very unsafe. I'm glad we learned about this because this is what's out there in the world and we need to be ready for it whenever we may have to deal with it. Mr. Thomas has given us an opportunity to learn about the real world and what's in it. Meanwhile, in other classes we learn what we are supposed to learn and not one thing extra.

When we studied child abuse I was going to open up my ears and let all of the information come in my head because I will never know when I will see child abuse in my neighborhood or even in my family. It's easy to spot but it's hard to make sure that it's really happening. Studying child abuse gave me a better understanding about how I can spot it and where I can go to stop it. Child Abuse was a very informative chapter for me.

When we were talking about divorce I almost started crying because my parents are getting a divorce and I couldn't really live with them being apart. I was happy when we started talking about divorce however, because my classmates could help me deal with my problems and could explain to me why, and whatever good might come out of a divorce. I thought the divorce chapter is where all of us really showed our emotions and really showed who we were.

Once we started on teen pregnancy, some of the students started to get immature because of some of the words and terms that were mentioned during the selections that we read. In order to prepare for this chapter we read selections about preventing teen pregnancy from the internet. We got speakers, Ms. Sachar and Ms. Adomako. They spoke on teen pregnancy to give us a clearer picture of the subject.

When we talked about gang violence it started to get more interesting because now we were learning about what happens everyday while we're in school, while we're sleeping, and even

when we are outside playing. I learned about the three “R’s” of gang culture, Respect, Revenge, and Reputation. Most kids think gangs are cool, but some of the time it’s the parent’s fault because there is no love in the family.

I would like to thank all of the speakers and all of the people who participated in writing this book. I would also like to thank Mr. Thomas for deciding to let us write “Thoughts... In the Key of Life.”

“We’ve Only Just Begun”

The End